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ABSTRACT

Students can better experience the impact of written words by the response of a real audience. This paper describes a letter-writing activity for sixth graders in which the students first identified and discussed real-life happenings which had caused disappointments with companies that had produced faulty items. They then obtained all the pertinent information on the product, when it was purchased, and a list of grievances and/or praise. Following instruction regarding business letter form, the students wrote actual letters to the companies. Photocopies of replies from manufacturers were kept on exhibit in a binder, showing the "power of the pen" through salutations to students and offerings of coupons, refunds, exchanges and complimentary items. Those students who received no response wrote a second letter with a reference to their unsuccessful first attempt. All second letters received replies. (KEH)

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POWERFUL LETTER WRITING

STUDENTS DISCOVER THE POWER OF THE PEN(CIL)

by Sandra P. Neuhauser

Writing is a means of communicating; it is one way to exchange ideas. The power of writing can only be experienced by your students when the designated audience is real. Your pupils can better experience the impact of written words by the response of a real audience.

I initiated a letter writing activity for ~~second~~ sixth graders stating, "Within the pen there is a power that students can use to correct an unhappy situation... if they use the power wisely." A vote can be taken to see how many students believe in this POWER OF THE PEN.

I motivated students to identify a situation in their lives in which they had been made unhappy due to the improper manufacturing of a product. I offered several real-life happenings they might have experienced:

- New toys with missing parts
- Toys which break too easily
- Packaged food items not complete
- Clothes that readily come apart after little wear, etc.

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The students' discussion generated their desire to communicate powerfully their disappointments with the companies that produced the faulty items.

The students discussed ways businesses might try to gain favor from unhappy customers:

- By making exchanges
- By giving refunds
- By providing product samples
- By sending coupons.

My students recognized that their business audience would rather expend resources (coupon, exchange, sample) to a dissatisfied customer than lose the customer. The business will gain back a buyer for their products, and the buyer then would continue to patronize the company.

Students might also choose to write about a product that they liked. I particularly encouraged students to write to book publishers. Students' opinions about books are welcomed by publishers. The POWER OF THE PEN might evoke letters of thanks from companies and possibly a copy of a book.

Before writing letters to manufacturers of faulty items, students must obtain:

1. Description of purchased product
2. Name and address of store where item was purchased
3. Name and address of manufacturer of item, and
4. Approximate date product was purchased.

We talked about the pupils acting like detectives looking for the needed information at home or in stores. They would look on box tops in the supermarket, packages in toy stores and find matching labels in department stores. It may take a week to gather this information.

The students' initial writing was a list of grievances and/or praise to the manufacturers. Students should include the reason the product had been purchased.

One of my students, Micha said, "Companies aren't going to care what kids say" I told him the proof would come when we see the responses to our letters.

I then followed with instruction on the business letter form. The students' needs for complying to rules of form were attributed to their wanting their letters to look "important" and "professional" and therefore treated as such. I also said, "The company will possibly think the letter is coming from an adult. Your handwriting and letter form will be only clues of age of writer."

Students were requested to make two "good" copies of their letters, one for their language folder and one to mail to their chosen company. Students had to supply their own envelopes and stamps.

The first time I used this approach, I was amazed at the many responses the students received. Two students exchanged poorly constructed shoes for new ones, many students received cents off coupons for food products, one student received six free hair care products, another student got baseball cards with bubble gum, a student was allowed to make an exchange of a pencil case, and two pupils got a refund of their purchase price.

As the students received replies to their letters, I made photocopies of the replies and put them in a binder. The students felt the POWER as they looked through the replies that had their classmates' names on the salutations and the offerings of coupons, refunds, exchanges, and complimentary items. As the pages increased in the binder, THE POWER OF THE PEN was dramatically evident.

Some students did not get responses and were disappointed. This gave me the opportunity to explain the saying, "if once you don't succeed, try try again." Second letters were written with a reference to their unsuccessful first attempt to get satisfaction from the company. All second letters received replies.

My students enjoyed this activity so much they wrote additional letters on their own. My students bragged about "their" POWER. Letter writing became a welcome activity in our classroom for the entire year.